

## CHRISTINA MOON – FAST ROAD TO SLOW FASHION

### 1.

#### The Secret World of Fast Fashion

Over the past 15 years, the fashion industry has undergone a profound and baffling transformation. What used to be a stable three-month production cycle—the time it takes to design, manufacture, and distribute clothing to stores, in an extraordinary globe-spanning process—has collapsed, across much of the industry, to just two weeks. The “on-trend” clothes that were, until recently, only accessible to well-heeled, slender urban fashionistas, are now available to a dramatically broader audience, at bargain prices. A design idea for a blouse, cribbed from a runway show in Paris, can make it onto the racks in Wichita in a wide range of sizes within the space of a month.

Popularly known as “fast fashion,” this trend has inspired a great deal of media attention, but not many satisfying explanations as to how this huge shift came about, especially in the United States, and why it happened when it did. Some accounts attribute the new normal to top-down “process innovations” at big companies like Inditex, the parent company of Zara and the world’s largest—but hardly most typical—fast-fashion retailer. And at times, popular writing has simply lumped fast fashion in with the generally sped-up pace of life in the digital age, as if complex industrial systems were as fluid as our social media habits.

So the questions remain: Who is designing and manufacturing these garments in the U.S.? How are so many different suppliers producing such large volumes of clothes so quickly, executing coordinated feats of design, production, and logistics in a matter of days?

For my own part, I went looking for the answers in church.

Specifically, I paid a visit this past summer to the Ttokamsa Home Mission Church, a large, gray, industrial box of a building near a highway on the edge of Echo Park, a residential neighborhood in East Los Angeles. A well-known local institution among Korean Americans, the church is the spiritual home of the Chang family—the owners of Forever 21, the largest fast-fashion retailer based in the U.S. (Look on the bottom of any canary-yellow Forever 21 shopping bag and you’ll find the words “John 3:16.”)

With more than 630 locations worldwide, the Changs’ retail empire employs more than 35,000 people and made \$3.7 billion in revenue in 2012. But in the pews at Ttokamsa, the Changs are in good company: The vast majority of their fellow parishioners are Korean families that also make their livelihoods in fast fashion.



**GARMENT OF PRAISE: The Ttokamsa Home Mission Church in eastern Los Angeles is the spiritual home of many of the Korean families who produce fast fashion, including the Chang family—the owners of Forever 21. (Photo: Lauren Lancaster)**

As an anthropologist, I have been coming to Los Angeles with the photographer [Lauren Lancaster](#) for the past two years to study the hundreds of Korean families who have, over the last decade, transformed the city's garment district into a central hub for fast fashion in the Americas. These families make their living by designing clothes, organizing the factory labor that will cut and sew them in places like China and Vietnam, and selling them wholesale to many of the most famous retailers in the U.S.—including Forever 21, Urban Outfitters, T.J. Maxx, Anthropologie, and Nordstrom.

I first became curious about the garment sector in Los Angeles after noticing that an increasingly large proportion of students at Parsons, the New York design school where I teach, were second-generation children of Korean immigrants from Southern California. Many of them were studying fashion marketing and design so they could return to Los Angeles to help scale up their parents' businesses. These students and their contemporaries were, I came to understand, the driving force behind U.S. fast fashion—a phenomenon whose rise is less a story about corporate innovation than one about an immigrant subculture coming of age.



**(Photo: Lauren Lancaster)**

The nerve center of fast fashion in America is a sprawling, 30-square-block neighborhood in downtown LA loosely known as the Jobber Market. The term “jobber,” a holdover from the days when Jewish and Iranian vendors dominated the neighborhood, refers to the wholesalers and middlemen who historically trafficked in downmarket clothing there. But the neighborhood’s name and reputation are outdated in a couple of ways: Today pretty much everyone who works there is either Korean or Mexican, and many of the businesses born in the area now design, manufacture, and wholesale their own garments for prominent markets.

Thousands of glass-fronted ground-floor showrooms, set into long single-or two-story buildings, line the streets. The sidewalks bustle with deliveries and pedestrians. Mannequins flank each entrance, displaying garments unpacked from the shipping containers that arrive daily from Asia at the Port of Los Angeles.

The showrooms are staffed in a remarkably consistent pattern: Korean husband-and-wife teams own the shops and run them alongside their children; Mexican husband-and-wife teams serve as salespeople or inventory workers and packers. And everyone is styled in the neighborhood’s latest fashions—which will, in turn, become the rest of the country’s latest fashions before long.



**NEXT TOP MODEL: Design studio at a garment business in L.A.'s Jobber Market. The rise of a new generation of design-savvy young Korean's in L.A.'s garment sector has propelled the fast-fashion trend. (Photo: Lauren Lancaster)**

Even for an insider, it's hard to get a sense of the scale of what's going on in the Jobber Market. About 3,000 businesses are officially registered with the Korean Apparel Manufacturers Association of Los Angeles. But people in the neighborhood will tell you that more than 6,000 Korean-owned clothing labels operate there. Some of them are just small-time mom-and-pop establishments; others are multimillion-dollar businesses. Gossip and rumor pervade the neighborhood—about who is doing well and who isn't; about who secretly owns a massive warehouse and manufacturing operation, and who has little but a flashy showroom.

How did this neighborhood become what it is? The answer lies in a 50-year process of migration and generational progress—one that has recently reached a kind of critical mass.

South Korea industrialized largely through its garment sector during the 1960s and '70s, making clothes for the U.S. export market. In the cities and the countryside alike, practically an entire generation of Koreans—a staggering proportion of the adult population—cut their teeth working in these factories. At the same time, Korea was still an impoverished country with high unemployment and an oppressive military regime. So thousands of Koreans fled, emigrating mainly to the U.S. and South America—in particular to Brazil and Argentina.

Without language skills or money, most ended up leveraging their ties to the textile trade back home, making or selling clothes. Korean immigrants went on to play large roles in the most important clothing markets in São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Guangzhou, L.A., and New York. "All of us—every single person I



knew—ended up working in the clothing business, even after graduating with a university degree,” says Mike Lee, a Korean fashion entrepreneur who came to Los Angeles from Brazil. “It was just one of those things where it was easy to learn the business and easy to get information about it, because everyone doing clothing in São Paulo was Korean.”



**INDUSTRIAL SUPPLY:** Some firms in the Jobber Market—like Sans Souci, a women’s apparel company—have major warehouse operations. Others get by with just a showroom. (Photo: Lauren Lancaster)

Then, during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, thousands of Korean garment-business owners left Brazil and Argentina for Los Angeles, driven by currency crises, inflation, rising crime, and the search for better educational opportunities for their children. It was those same children who would go on to drive America’s fast-fashion revolution.

The immigrant entrepreneurs who set up shop in the Los Angeles garment district up through the 1990s brought with them decades of industry experience. They understood pattern-making, fit, and quality control; and their diasporic connections to other Koreans working abroad in the trade connected them to fabric and trim sources, factories, managers, sample-makers, and sewers in places like Brazil, China, and Vietnam.

What they lacked, often, was American cultural fluency, a sensibility for aesthetics and design, and the capacity to connect with American retailers—traits that were becoming increasingly necessary for survival. By 2000, by many accounts, a large swath of garment businesses were failing. Korean-owned sewing factories, cutting studios, and small-time manufacturers were going belly-up in waves. The industry was changing.



**The Jobber Market stretches out. (Photo: Lauren Lancaster)**

Gone were the days when a garment shop just took orders from companies to create basic designs (imagine a shirt from the Gap circa 1995) that would continue to sell for several seasons. Big retailers were doing a lot less of their own designing, while requiring more complicated details and features in trim and ornamentation. “Before, as long as there was a hole for the head and a sleeve, you could sell [a shirt] with any print,” says So Yun, the designer for a Jobber Market company called Collective Concepts. “Now it’s designed.”

Only businesses with a honed sense of fashion trends could survive. And with more and more Koreans arriving to open up wholesale shops and showrooms, competition became cutthroat.

In the 2000s, the first major wave of second-generation Korean immigrants— kids who had grown up around their parents’ showrooms—started hitting adulthood. They headed off to American universities to study business, or to schools like Parsons to acquire skills in design, marketing, and merchandising. “They are going to fashion schools everywhere—in Paris, London, Milan, L.A., and New York, all over the world,” says Tommy Choi, a 15-year veteran of the Jobber Market.

On their return to Los Angeles, the kids revamped their family businesses: re-branding, creating company logos, building out showroom spaces to make them appealing to American wholesale buyers, and setting up sleek websites. Their Americanized cultural identities and native English skills allowed Jobber Market businesses to communicate fluently with domestic department-store and retail buyers. And their design, marketing, and merchandising skills allowed companies in the neighborhood to start making clothes on the cutting edge of fashion.



**FIELD OF JEANS:** Koos Manufacturing Inc., a Korean-owned factory in the Southgate neighborhood of L.A. is one of the nation’s largest denim manufacturers. It does its own design, cutting, sewing, finishing, and more. (Photo: Lauren Lancaster)

This simple change had a profound effect: It brought nearly all the parts of the apparel cycle—design, production, logistics, wholesaling, and marketing—under the purview of individual Korean fashion businesses. The levels of trust and coordination within each family business boosted the efficiency of the global production process. And the fierce competition *between* young Koreans in these family businesses sparked an explosion of creativity.

In 1984, Forever 21 was a single retail store in the East L.A. neighborhood of Highland Park. By 2001, the company had 50 stores. The retailer continued to gain a following because it stocked so many on-trend, knock-off garments, offering new designs almost daily. By many accounts, this constant stream of styles—the secret to Forever 21’s original success—came from the Jobber Market.

Competing against retailers that were still observing the three-month fashion cycle, Forever 21’s buyers only needed to show up daily in the Jobber Market and choose from a smorgasbord of fashion-forward designs, all ready to be shipped that day. If the company’s buyers did not agree with one vendor’s price, all they had to do was go next door, where a similar design could likely be had for cheaper.





**Koos Manufacturing Inc. (Photo: Lauren Lancaster)**

Today, Forever 21 has its own warehouses abroad to keep up with global demand, but it still maintains some ties to the Korean garment district. The company sends agents to the neighborhood—and to other similar markets around the world—to check in with vendors and keep track of what’s trending where. And several manufacturers in the neighborhood say that Forever 21 still buys clothes from them.

There’s one more important part of the picture: Fast fashion did not just arise from a new intergenerational division of labor within Korean fashion businesses. It also arose from a new distribution of risk in the industry, with much of it falling on the shoulders of the Korean and Mexican families near the bottom of the production chain. For the fast-fashion suppliers in the L.A. Jobber Market, consumer demands are unpredictable and the market is highly volatile. Wholesalers live at the mercy of retailers who set prices and squeeze profit margins; families must invest cash and put thousands of styles into production before knowing what will sell. Everyone in the Jobber Market tells me about the stress, likening the business to gambling at a casino.

Far beyond the confines of the Los Angeles garment district, one of the most striking hallmarks of the fast-fashion era is the rise of the YouTube “haul” video. A typical haul video—so named for the overstuffed bags of clothing one can purchase from a fast-fashion outlet for relatively little money—shows a young woman, just home from shopping, pulling out new purchases and showing them off for the camera. The videos exemplify the new dynamics of fashion consumption in America: the sheer cheapness, the low barriers to gratification, the disposability of stylish clothing. As one star of a haul video recently said, “I bought these jeans just because it was a \$6-denim day at Forever 21.”



On a residential street in Glendale, California, Alice Moon’s bedroom does not look so different from the kind of backdrop one often sees in haul videos. It is decorated with cut-and-paste collages of clothes, runway models, and magazine cover girls. She’s cut the word “fashion” out in bubble letters and strung it decoratively across one wall. Shopping bags are strewn about everywhere—from H&M, Zara, Forever 21—stuffed with clothing that has yet to be unpacked, folded, put away, or even worn.



**UP AND COMING: Alice Moon, the teenage daughter of a fast fashion family and a parishioner at the Ttokamsa Home Mission Church, in her room in Glendale. After she graduates high school, Moon hopes to study fashion design at Parsons. (Photo: Lauren Lancaster)**

Moon (no relation to me) is a parishioner at the Ttokamsa church, the daughter of a fast-fashion family with a business in the Jobber Market. A junior in high school, Alice tells me that after she graduates, she too hopes to attend Parsons to study fashion design; she has already made her first campus visit. She grew up helping out behind the store counter, navigating among boxes in the warehouse, peering over shoulders in the design studio, and modeling clothes. She’s always been a part of the design process one way or another, she says.

Alice’s mom, the main designer in the family, tells me her daughter has come along on several trips to Paris, Milan, and London—to fabric shows and trade shows, and on shopping and research trips to help the family stay abreast of unfolding global trends. Alice is clearly being ably groomed for the family business, although her parents tell me she may pursue whatever makes her happy.

Even sitting in her room, Alice looks effortlessly fashionable. With her hair tied up in a ponytail, she’s wearing little black pleather shorts and a cute baseball T-shirt. These could be items in somebody’s haul

video—and indeed, maybe they are, somewhere on the Internet. But everything that Alice Moon is wearing is something that her own family designed and made.

## 2.

### **Fast Road to Slow Fashion**

I began the field research for this project on the fast-fashion industry in the summer of 2012. The initial objective and goals of the project included learning what fast-fashion is, why it is so desirable, how it quickly picks up on and mirrors trends, where it comes from and who makes it, and why it is so cheap. Key to understanding its emergence and now dominance of fast-fashion on garments within the U.S. is the geographic significance and role of Los Angeles and the role of two immigrant communities, Korean and Mexican, who work in the downtown L.A. fast-fashion industry. I set out to understand the migration histories of members within these communities and what role their work and identities played in the design and making of these fashions. I was also interested in learning what social and cultural practices were involved in the design and making of the clothing, and what ties they cultivated for its quick mass production and distribution. I began to collaborate with Lauren Lancaster on the project since I felt a story on fashion would nearly be impossible to tell without the visual narrative of images. Fashion Studies scholars claim that fashion is now intensely preoccupied with image and appearance because of the Internet, social-media, and the significance of runway shows. These scholars believe that we no longer buy clothing based on feel, fabric, quality or fit, as consumers once did just a decade earlier but on the way clothing looks and appears in image. I felt that a visual narrative of this project could bring out new dimensions in telling the story of fast-fashion – images of a production process that are rarely photographed, and images that would make us rethink the imagined but real design and labor divide.

Our first research trip to Los Angeles in summer of 2012 focused on our learning the physical geography, contours, and composition of the district. There are over 6,000 wholesale fast-fashion businesses in downtown Los Angeles and the industrial areas beyond the borders of the formal district house showrooms and the headquarters for American fashion retail companies like Forever 21 and American Apparel. This area also contains the largest denim-making manufacturing facilities (and largest vertically integrated factory) within the US, with the Port of Los Angeles located just twenty-five miles south of the area. We spent much of our time setting up meetings and interviews with various wholesalers (the majority whom are Korean American and Korean Brazilian) and Mexican sales agents and laborers in the district. We found that these two communities were not only transforming this downtown neighborhood spatially, architecturally, geographically, in its ethnic and racial makeup, they were also transforming workplace dynamics, divisions of labor in the design and production process while changing the actual material form and object of fashion itself. I was particularly interested in how their diasporic networks established new trade routes that linked Asia with the Americas, and how their own continual, transnational migrations and mobile identities carried certain knowledge, experiences, languages and skills from one place or city to another. These networks rely a great deal on strange performances of fictive kin or ethnic ties, a malleable and convenient approach to race to grease the wheels of trade, inflated or subdued national identities and new xenophobias to justify all kinds of ties and practices. In just one decade, these Korean and Mexican fast-fashion entrepreneurs created new routes in the creation, marketing, distribution, communication, consumption, and disposal of this one commodity. We spent much of our first summer trying to understand how the amalgamations of new skills, intergenerational knowledge, and migration histories met with new communications technologies that drove the making and popularization of such cheap and trendy clothing within the US throughout the 2000s. Even more interesting for me was that it all centered around families -- husband and wife teams,

sisters partnering with sisters or brothers with brothers, parents working with children, in laws and cousins, carrying out the necessary roles needed in the design, production and marketing of fast-fashion. We also learned about the different kinds of risks involved in the making of fast-fashion, which explained why it was always so difficult to gain “access” to anyone willing to speak to us. These immigrant communities started out in the business because they had little access to other jobs, fields, and opportunities within the US. There were Korean wholesalers who were afraid to lose out on trade secrets, didn’t want others to know which factories they used in China so that the designs remained secret, or didn’t want others to know how successful or small their businesses were. There were Mexican employees who were undocumented and had made multiple border crossings by foot, who did not want us to share their information with their employers, conducted various businesses of their own on the weekends, and joked that they did not want us to report them to the Dep’t of Homeland Security. Further, most everyone in the district plays some part in shadow, black market, informal economies – the industry is handled entirely in cash and there are money laundering schemes, participation in peso exchange schemes or key money bribes, payouts for the use of shipping routes and containers controlled by drug cartels, illegal labor brokers, factory-owned cash vans in place of regulated banking systems, involvement in the counterfeit goods trade, the hiring of undocumented underpaid laborers, the hiring of sewers to cut out Made in China labels and sew in Made in the USA labels, the bribing of customs officials – it goes on and on. It is impossible to exist within this industry without one’s involvement in some form of illegal activity and families had their reputations or were trying to build them, trying to keep their work afloat and continue their livelihoods. In this extremely competitive and paranoid environment, everyone tried to mine us for information about each other. We were surrounded by the yearnings of those who wanted citizenship, acceptance into American society, a sense of status through luxury and name brand goods, the chance to say their clothes were sold by the biggest and most famous American retailers.

Some of the most challenging conversations Lauren and I had, early on, were about this idea of “documentation” – the writing out of lives, the photographing of faces, the publishing of stories in what kind of forum or platform and to whom. The practice of our professions (photography, writing), our thought process or the way we approached questions and research, our sense of ethics as well as our own interests and stakes in the project, merged and diverged throughout the fieldwork. Still, we had to develop quickly a rhythm and rapport when it came to interviews, to get to know people, gain information, and bring together a story the way we wanted visually and in text. It wasn’t until we could clearly speak about the project, relay that it wasn’t some New York Times exposé or tied to some profit making endeavor, and information that would be shared with students who were worried about their futures in fashion – that we would be invited into workplaces, neighborhoods, hangouts and homes. There were so many who were generous with their time, information, and guidance.

Our second summer in 2013 focused on the origins and formation of the district and includes the story of Forever 21, the largest US fast-fashion retailer with over 400 stores worldwide. My Fashion Studies colleagues and students often look down upon Forever 21, but in the downtown L.A. jobber market, most everyone talks about this company with praise. The Chang family (owners of Forever 21 who infamously print “John 3:16” on the bottom of their plastic yellow shopping bags) is the epitome of the classic immigrant “American Dream” type story and their rise in American fashion powerfully resonates throughout the community as mythology. Hundreds of more families come into the business each year hearing their story and hoping to see their businesses succeed, even though each day one witnesses debt, desperation, and bankruptcy throughout the market on a daily basis. I never did get an interview with Forever 21 or the Chang family (though the company responded to the fact-checker for the PS magazine article) but we did find ourselves attending their church in a suburb of Los Angeles after I



contacted their minister and explained the project. Soon after, we were introduced to congregation members who all had ties to the local industry and from here we learned the origins of the Korean “jobber market.” We met two sisters who run a successful fast-fashion business in downtown and who were original investors with the Chang family in the building of the San Pedro Wholesale Market. This is a building that sits on an entire block in the heart of the district and is modeled after a famous wholesale clothing market in Seoul. They told us about growing up with a dad who was a blackjack dealer in Las Vegas, taking family vacations with the Chang family, and the role of religion in their business. These threads in our conversations – gambling, risk, money, religion, and fashion made its way into a short article I wrote for Pacific Standard magazine accompanied by Lauren’s photographs, and which was published in March 2014.

By the time we arrived in LA this past summer for our third and final trip, we had a clearer picture of the many inadequacies in our research. We thought the summer could be spent setting up contacts for field sites abroad (in China and Mexico) but we also wanted to use the time to think more carefully about the images we had and needed and how they would impact the story. What information could these images tell given the limitations of access to this contemporary archive that we were trying to build and piece out in front of us? What was this form of knowledge production – the use of image and text? What narrative or information could the photos tell us as individual pieces but also as part of a series? We were frustrated not just by the difficulty of access but also the usual expectations and tropes found in images when one thinks of “production” and “fashion.” Much of photography is based on access and timing – two difficult and uncontrollable aspects in telling a story. Further, and in many ways, I found the journalistic writing in the PS magazine article freeing and I very much enjoyed the collaborative process between myself and the editor and fact-checker. At the same time, journalism only allowed for a limited number of words and a scripted template in structure, a somewhat formulaic timing of “punch lines” in the writing that left out all the interesting ambiguities we witnessed. Lauren felt similarly about the images – she had a strong desire to get away from the predictable journalistic “newspaperish” images that are often captured on fashion and work and cycled through media time and time again. We used the summer to approach the research in a less literal way and with an eye towards sense and tone, feeling, and landscape. How to capture and tell this story using images and writing that challenge our expectations of what we are about to read and “see” when it comes to the figure of the “immigrant worker” and “fashion,” of the geography of Los Angeles, of the workplace and of home?

In total, these questions on narrative form and visual representation circle back and press closely to some of the original theoretical and methodological questions I had at the start of this project. How does one “capture” and then express this ever changing and evolving global industry as it unfolds with its innumerable moving parts? I am frustrated with the way the global fashion industry is described – in the language of economics, as if taught only to MBA students, as a pyramid scheme made up of markets and commodity chains, where innovations trickle-down from up top. Further, the academy has now had two decades of language on “global flows” and “circuits,” like water or the Internet – a language that assumes the efficiencies of a smoothly run machine. Yet, fast-fashion as a material object reflects and embodies all these highly contingent, improvised relationships and encounters which end up driving the industry. I wanted to ask, what are these evolving relationships and overlapping histories, varying knowledge and memories among workers who design and shape the making of this object? What is so ineffable about fashion and clothing (it isn’t furniture, iphones, or cars) that is both so old world yet technologically innovative, and which continues to socialize and produce new cultural workers into its global industries? What is involved in the design, production, use, and transformation of this peripheral yet ubiquitous material artifact?

In past, and in part because of my disciplinary training and background, I had studied the work of anthropologists Aihwa Ong and Anna Tsing who write on global connections and who would have approached fast-fashion as a “global assemblage” born out of “friction” in continual formation. Much of their work asks how we capture the chaotic conditions of our material and social universe - the things and formed knowledge, systems and structures, diverse and conflicting social contexts that are produced from highly contingent encounters and interactions? How does flux and the fleeing become fixed, captured, turned into knowledge, factified, disseminated, known and explained? I think these are important questions to ask in fast-fashion, as it draws one away from predictable cause and effect, commodity-supply chain descriptions, which is how it is often imagined. At the same time, I have been reading the work of writers Amitav Ghosh, Rebecca Solnit, Robert Walser, even Lydia Davis, who in their writing attend to what is felt and lived - the varied atlases of experience and diverse memories that complicate our understanding of history and culture, shaping uncertain futures. For me, their writing goes beyond the physical, architectural, and geographic borders of “global circuits,” and uses nuances like “shadowlines” and “the faraway nearby” -- concepts which attempt to describe in memory and legacy the shadows and vagaries of perspective, all of which powerfully inform social and cultural formations. Like these authors, I want to understand the larger historical context and future impact of the fast-fashion industry on cities, labor, and material forms, but I also want to be attentive to scale and the human subject and worker in all this. What are the shifting conditions in the lives of these workers whom inform the larger daily transformations of this global industry? How does one come to understand or make sense of their own position within all this, and what aspirations and risks are involved? How do memory, history, and migration play a role in socializing practices, social formations, and the production of knowledge in fast fashion? Among migrating subjects, what atlases of experience did they bring with them to new locales? What colonial legacies, knowledge, relationships, and encounters become embodied in their everyday fashion work? How does this shape and transform the fashion and aesthetic forms that they make? If “our daily lives are grounded experiences of history,” my challenge here is to find my methodological way in. How to locate this phenomenon in the historical and structural maps of industry, but also in the lived experiences that shape the material and aesthetic making of fashion? The “vanishingly small” and the “evanescent” are situated within a larger unfolding historical moment, which is difficult to “see” as we currently live through it. These are very basic questions that I return to over and over again.

Lauren and I are also engaged in a study of writer/photographer collaborations such as James Agee and Walker Evans and Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange. Most recently, Lauren has introduced me to the work of Diane Arbus. I am less attracted to her photography and more preoccupied with the strange, open, and beautiful way she writes – her field notes and observations of the subjects of whom she photographed. During this last trip, on Lauren’s suggestion, I purchased the book *Revelations* which was published by her daughter and the only place in which one can read some of Arbus’s original field notes. Within the book is her 1963 Guggenheim Fellowship proposal which states,

*“I want to photograph the considerable ceremonies of our present because we tend while living here and now to perceive only what is random and barren and formless about it...while we regret that the present is not like the past and despair of its ever becoming the future, its innumerable inscrutable habits lie in wait for their meaning. I want to gather them, like somebody’s grandmother putting up preserves, because they will have been so beautiful.”*

Arbus goes on to describe the ritual and rites, the celebrations and everyday life ceremonies, the gambles of families, the places they inhabit, and in general, their gatherings. She concludes with, “These

are our symptoms and our monuments. I want simply to save them, for what is ceremonious and curious and commonplace will be legendary.” It isn’t so much that I take from her work the literal things she wrote, but more her sense of tone and urgency – her desire to take images and write about the human condition as both fragile and fleeting and incomplete.

Given our schedules, limitations and time constraints, attention to children, dogs, cats and partners, work and travel schedules, limited funding, and the demands of our jobs, we look to gather traces over an arc of time that is honest with what is manageable in our day to day. Instead of imagining this project as a whole project, a whole book, a whole entity that explains it all away seamlessly with a beginning middle and end, we are attempting to cobble together small reflective bits which look more like the fits and starts we’ve experience all along. With each site of exploration, we will make short printouts of images (30 images total) with accompanying text/writing, and perhaps we will eventually have a book. The printouts of the photographer Alec Soth inspire us, which is somewhat of a loose model. We hope the images and text will bring out an argument, but we are interested more in evoking tone in our understanding of fast-fashion. We hope that this story on fast-fashion will make us and others rethink labor and design, but also what we deem to be anecdotal, evidential, empirical, archival, gestural, and what is “meaning” in acts of witnessing and telling.